



## The Consigliere

MAURA EGAN TAKES A MEETING WITH MICHELE CANIATO, THE DESIGN WORLD'S NUMBER-ONE POWER BROKER.

**I**f you have a good idea in America, you can do business," says Michele Caniato, sitting in a conference room in his office on West 25th Street. "In Italy, no one takes you seriously if you are under 50." At 36, Caniato presides over Culture and Commerce, a design consultancy that matches Fortune 500 companies and cultural institutions with designers like Philippe Starck and Marcel Wanders. "I wrote Rem Koolhaas a letter recently, and he responded," he says, uncorking a goofy smile that seems at odds with his wheeling-and-dealing reputation. "That would never happen in Italy."

Caniato is being modest. It rarely works like that in America, either, unless you've got someone as singular as Caniato, who can ring up Koolhaas, along with Bill Gates (Starck designed a mouse for Microsoft) and Wolfgang Puck (the chef will create a cookware collection for Salton), because of his talent for making things happen. Caniato was born into what he refers to as the "Italian design mafia." His uncle, Giulio Castelli, founded Kartell. His mother was a graphic designer, but his father was a banker, and he felt the tug of the worlds of both art and business. He studied architecture and industrial

**Art of the deal** Michele Caniato matches the creative with the corporate.

100 PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FRIEDBERG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



design at Polytechnic University of Milan, but after graduating in 1994, he wasn't sure of a career path. At his uncle's suggestion, he came to work at Kartell in New York, with George Beylerian, who would become his mentor.

In 1997, the two formed Material ConneXion (Beylerian is C.E.O. of the company, while Caniato is executive vice president), a materials resource library for designers, architects, engineers and manufacturers. As clients like Nike and BMW visited to check out the latest fibers, gels and resins, Caniato recognized that there was a gap in the design market for connecting the creative with the corporate. "For a long time, people looked at design with two criteria: How much does it cost? And can I return it?" Caniato says. "But now housewives in Ohio know who Starck and Michael Graves are." In 2001, he established Culture and Commerce with a grand-slam commission: Philippe Starck would create 52 household products for Target. The collaboration, however, was not a runaway

success: the products sold inconsistently, as mothers were perplexed by items like the slick baby monitor that doubled as a necklace. Caniato glosses over the failure like any good agent, explaining: "You need to be brave and make bold statements that might not sell. It creates a buzz."

"Michele wants to be the William Morris of the design world," says the developer Sam

underwhelmed. And when fielding work for the preternaturally busy Starck, who shuttles among dozens of work sites across the globe, Caniato is extremely selective. "I know pretty much what Philippe will and won't do. It has to be new and fun. No more chairs," says Caniato, who first met Starck at age 10, when the designer was experimenting with molded-plastic seating for Kartell. But Caniato vetted

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Nazarian, who courted Caniato for months to lure Starck for a project in Los Angeles. Nazarian was only 27 at the time and owned nightclubs that were mostly famous for being after-school hangouts for Paris Hilton and friends. Although he was intrigued that Nazarian was a partner in the Viceroy hotel properties, Caniato was initially

Nazarian and discovered that he came from one of the most "honorable" families on the West Coast. "Sam is a good family guy," says Caniato, sounding more like an old-school *consigliere* than a BlackBerry-punching power agent.

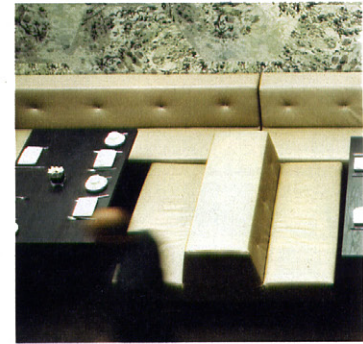
Caniato also recognized that Nazarian was interested in doing something different and almost monumental in scale. Caniato brokered

Product placement

1. The Vase of Phases, designed by Dror Benshetrit of Studio Dror for Rosenthal.
2. Starck's rendering of Slab restaurant for Sam Nazarian in Los Angeles.
3. The mouse designed by Philippe Starck for Microsoft.
4. Marcel Wanders's lobby for the Hotel on Rivington.



the Fall 2005



Michele Caniato describes the work of Marcel Wanders as emotional. The Dutch designer recently finished the interiors of Thor restaurant in the Hotel on Rivington.

an exclusive seven-year contract between Nazarian and Starck, in which the designer will work on properties in Los Angeles, New York, Miami and other locations. ("Philippe will relandscape the architecture of Los Angeles," Caniato boasts.) The \$70 million Miami project puts Starck right back in South Beach, where he minted the now-exhausted white-on-white boutique formula that started at the Delano. Caniato will be involved in every step, playing advisor, guardian angel and diplomat. "With Sam and Philippe, you need a mediator," he says. "It's like two dogs, both trying to be the toughest."

For Marcel Wanders, Caniato keeps the project on a more intimate scale. "I never want my designers competing," he says. "Marcel's work is emotionally driven." (He cites Wanders's candle lamp for Flos, which turns itself off when you blow on it.) Under Caniato's guidance, the radical Dutch designer has created a glass for Bombay Sapphire's ad campaign, and he recently designed the lobby and Thor restaurant at Manhattan's Hotel on Rivington in his signature high-baroque motif.

"Michele understands the big picture," says the Israeli designer Dror Benshetrit, who contacted Caniato at the suggestion of Paola Antonelli,

an architecture and design curator at the Museum of Modern Art. Caniato liked Benshetrit's work but waited an entire year to sign him. "He wanted to make sure I could carry the business," says Benshetrit.

Caniato's first move with Benshetrit was bold — he hooked him up with Rosenthal, the 126-year-old German chinaware company. Benshetrit's Vase of Phases — a porcelain vase that looks smashed and then reassembled — became a surprise hit. Recently, Caniato has negotiated a veritable windfall, landing him 15 different commissions, including six more collections for Rosenthal: a new Levi's showroom in Manhattan; and a footwear project with Puma.

Despite the impressive record, Caniato offers more than just a solid handshake and a nose for numbers. "He's not just about getting the big business. He's devoted to his designers," Benshetrit says. Indeed, Caniato is always networking. Currently, he's in the market for a nice girl for Benshetrit. Perhaps his old friend Starck sums him up best. "You could leave him with your keys, your bank-account number, your wife and your children, and everything will be protected and respected," Starck says. "He's totally reliable." ■